



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 5 Prayers That Rocked the World

By Pastor Bryan Clark

Message Title: A Prayer In the Midst of Her Pain Pt. 2

Release Date: Wednesday 11/13/19

Then Hannah rose after eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. She made a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts (God of the armies, there it is again), if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head.” (*NASB, 1 Samuel 1:9-11)

So, as she does every year, Hannah goes to the temple to pray and she pours out her heart before God. One of the things to notice in this story is the emphasis on prayer. It comes up over and over and over again. She says, “God, if You give me a son, I’ll give him back to You for all of his life.” When it refers to the razor and the head, it’s a reference to what was called the Nazarite vow. Typically, the Nazarite vow was for a period of time. In this case, she was saying it would be a vow that would define the entirety of his life. “If You just give me a son, I promise I will give him back.”

Now it came about, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli was watching her mouth. As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So, Eli thought she was drunk. Then Eli said to her, “How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you.” But Hannah replied, “No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit (bitter in spirit); I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the LORD. Do not consider your maidservant as a worthless woman; for I have spoken until now out of my great concern and provocation.” Then Eli answered and said, “Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him.” She said, “Let your maidservant find favor in your sight.” So, the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. (Vs. 12-18)

So, Hannah goes to the temple. She’s praying. Eli thinks she’s drunk, probably a commentary on what was happening a lot at the temple those days, and probably also some insight as to Eli’s spiritual discernment. So, he confronts her, and she says, “I’m not drunk. Man, I am in pain; I’m pouring out my heart. I’m bitter of soul; I’m pouring out my soul before God, that He might give me a son.” And Eli responds by saying that God is going to give the asking you to have asked of Him. That’s literally what the Hebrew says—a tremendous emphasis on the fact that she asked, and God is going to give the asking that she has asked of Him. Clearly that’s what she understands, because suddenly she cheers up. She eats; she smiles and she’s ready to move on.

Verse 19:

Then they arose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD and returned again to their house in Ramah. And Elkanah had relations with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked him of the LORD.” (Vs. 19-20)

It’s always interesting in these Hebrew narratives, when the technique is kind of this rapid-fire through the details. She has been praying for years—probably well over a decade for a son. She’s in unimaginable pain and then the text just goes, “Boom! Boom! Boom!” There’s a son! But the point is: this is no problem for God. There’s a God story going on and there’s a personal story going on. There’s no way Hannah could understand what the God story is, but both of the stories are going on and, when it was time for God’s hand to move, God responds to her prayer—gives her a son. That’s no problem for God.

She names him Samuel. The name Samuel does not mean God is sovereign. He did it anyway. It means, because I asked. Now the name Samuel, technically in the Hebrew, doesn’t mean that, but this is not at all uncommon, that parents in the Old Testament are a little free and loose with the language. She is saying: that’s what it means to her. Because she asked, God has given her a son. Again, notice the emphasis—it’s a response to her asking, that God has given her a son.

Then the man Elkanah went up with all his household to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD and stay there forever.” Elkanah her husband said to her, “Do what seems best to you. Remain until you have weaned him; only may the LORD confirm His word.” So, the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with a three-year-old bull and one ephah of flour and a jug of wine and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh, although the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull and brought the boy to Eli. She said, “Oh, my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the LORD. For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my asking which I asked of Him. So, I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is dedicated to the LORD.” And he worshiped the LORD there. (Vs. 21-28)

So, Hannah has a son. Elkanah is going back to worship and Hannah says, “I’m not going to go back until he’s weaned.” —in that culture, probably three or four years of age. “Once he’s weaned, I will take him back; I will fulfill my vow; I will give him to God forever.” The language is literally, “I will lend him to God, but I will lend him to God forever”. So, when the son is weaned, Elkanah and Hannah, true to her word, take Samuel back. And she tells Eli, “This is the boy! I poured out my heart and you said God would answer, and here he is! And my promise was that I would lend him to God forever.” So, she gave Samuel to Eli and [he] worshiped there.

Starting in Chapter 2, there is this wonderful prayer by Hannah. We could spend a whole week just on that alone but, for the sake of the storyline, I want us to skip that and go to verse 11:

Then Elkanah went to his home at Ramah. But the boy ministered to the LORD before Eli the priest. (NASB, 1 Samuel 2:11)

At this part in the text, what you have to notice is, God is starting to make us more aware that there is a God story which involves the nation, and there’s a personal story that involves Hannah, and those two stories are starting to intersect in a significant way.

There's a personal story that involves Hannah and those two stories are starting to intersect in a significant way.

It's becoming more and more obvious God was up to something all along. Just notice the structure of the text. We've been talking about Samuel. Now in Verse 12, it shifts completely to Eli and his sons:

Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the LORD. (NASB, 1 Samuel 2:12)

Now that's a problem when the priest doesn't even know the LORD, and it goes on to describe how wicked these boys are.

Verse 17 summarizes it:

The sin of the young men was very great before the LORD, for the men despised the offering of the LORD.

But now we shift back to the Samuel story:

Now Samuel was ministering before the LORD, as a boy wearing a linen ephod. And his mother would make him a little robe and bring it up to him from year to year when she would come up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife and say, "May the LORD give you children from this woman in place of the one she dedicated (lent) to the LORD." And they went to their own home. The LORD visited Hannah; and she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew up before the LORD. (Vs. 18-21)

So, we did the Samuel story, but now it shifts back to the Eli and his sons' story.

Now Eli was very old... (Vs. 22a)

And it goes on to describe how, because he had not dealt with his very evil sons, that God was going to deal with him: that his sons were out, that his family line was out, and God would replace Eli and his sons with someone who was committed to Him. But in the midst of all of that, you have Verse 26, the Samuel story:

Now the boy Samuel was growing in stature and in favor both with the LORD and with men.

Then back to the Eli story: Eli's out; the boys are out. We need a new priest; we need a new judge; we need a new prophet; we need a new priest. Chapter 3 - Who do you think that is? – "The Call of Samuel": the convergence of the two stories comes together. No question that's what the writer is trying to help us understand. It's this story...it's this story...it's this story...and finally the two stories come together.

But there is no way that Hannah could have possibly understood year after year after year that God was up to something—something so dramatic that it would change a nation. It's really important to notice in the text that the writer says, year after year after year after year. We tend to get the impression on many of these Old Testament stories that: somebody prayed; God heard; problem solved. Why doesn't it work that way for me? What we missed in the process is: this was week after week, month after month, year after year; probably easily well over a decade of

pain, and struggle, and disappointment, and crying, and bitterness, and pouring out her soul to God, wondering, “What is the problem; what is the problem that God doesn’t hear me; what is the problem that God doesn’t care?”

There is no way Hannah could have known that God was up to something big. She could not have possibly known that one day God would hear her prayer and it would move the hand of a sovereign God. And God would give her a son at just the right time and that this would be a son that would change a nation. This is a son that would be the last judge, would be the next prophet, would be the next priestly line. This would be a son that would anoint the first and second kings of Israel. This is a son who would end up in the Hebrews 11 Faith Hall of Fame. This is a son that would make such a difference in the world, that thousands of years later, Christians would still be naming their children Samuel, in honor of her son. There was no way, in the midst of her pain, she could have understood that God was up to something really big.

In this particular story, both we as the reader, but also Hannah and Elkanah, have the opportunity eventually to see the story come together. For every one of those, there are thousands where we never have that opportunity. I cringe when I hear well-meaning people tell people who are suffering, “Someday you will understand this.” Says who...says who? For every story where it finally, eventually, it makes sense, there are thousands where it won’t. It doesn’t mean there isn’t a God story. It doesn’t mean that God isn’t up to something. It doesn’t mean that there aren’t reasons and things going on far beyond our ability to understand, but there’s no guarantee that eventually we’ll get that answer, that it will make sense, that we’ll have an “Ah-hah” moment and say, “That’s why I had all this pain in my life!”

Some of the greatest steps of faith we’ll take, is to choose to believe this is true, to believe that all things do work together for good to those who love Him. There is a God story and God’s up to something big. But there’s also my own personal story, and at times it may be filled with pain and struggle and questions and confusion, and sometimes I just have to believe, by faith, that God’s up to something and I don’t know what it is. I don’t understand but I’ve got to hang on by faith. You say, “Where’s the hope in that?” The hope is in the LORD of the armies of Heaven—the LORD of hosts—because that name reminds us that this is the God who always wins! And at the end of the day, the God story and my own personal story eventually merge together into one story in Paradise forever. That I do know—and I believe that with all my heart.

But in the meantime, this gets really hard sometimes. In the meantime, we cannot stop believing. We cannot just roll over and give up and say, “God’s sovereign. He’s going to do His thing—nothing I can do to change that.” There is absolutely no reason to believe that God would have given Hannah, Samuel, without her prayers. The emphasis in the text is over and over and over again because she prayed...because she prayed! She even named him: “I asked of God and God remembered me and God answered my prayer.” There’s every reason to believe if she would have rolled over and given up, that Samuel would not have come. I don’t know how this story would have unfolded, but it’s not correct to say, God would have done that anyway. That’s not what the text says. The text says God responded to the prayer of a woman in pain.

And this is what we must understand. We can’t just roll over; we can’t just give up; we can’t just say it doesn’t work. It is possible that that prayer that you have uttered day after day, week after week, year after year, that flows out of the pain in your heart, it’s possible that just because God hasn’t answered the prayer before, it is possible that for reasons only God fully understands, tomorrow, that prayer of pain may move the hand of a sovereign God, and God may choose to rock your world! You can’t let go of that. You can’t stop believing that. You have to hang on—because prayer does move the hand of a sovereign God.

Arnie: Bryan, you pointed out that Hannah prayed for years and years. And that's critical, because in my experience, I know my mom prayed for me for 26 years to become a Christ follower, so God doesn't answer right away, but then you have to believe He will.

Bryan: Well, I think that's a really important point, because it's easy in these Biblical texts to lose sight of how much time passes, [That's true.] and then you just start thinking, Hannah prayed and God answered, and that's true of a lot of these stories. It's like this was a long, long, painful season in Hannah's life, before God finally answered the prayer.

Cara: It says that Eli's boys were worthless and that they despised the offering of the Lord. This sounds just like Cain.

Bryan: Yeah, that's actually a really good point. It does. They're going to be their own God and run the Tabernacle on their terms and that's pretty much how they're described.

Arnie: Something I wonder about is, how excited do you think Eli was about getting a five-year-old boy to raise, and what do you think his wife thought?

Bryan: Very different culture, very different times. It wasn't all that unusual that a child would be left and dedicated. There also would have been females working at the Tabernacle that would have helped with all this. So maybe not as unusual as it would seem to us, and he did have help, but the faith of Hannah to leave little Samuel in an environment, that we learn is very corrupt. To me, that's significant faith.

Cara: Well then Eli raising Samuel, because his own sons weren't great, so...

Bryan: Yeah, and Samuel's sons didn't turn out so good either.

Cara: So, we see this dual story going on. Part of it having to do with Hannah's personal needs and then the other was having to do with the nation of Israel. When you think about it, you see dual stories throughout the Bible with Abraham, Moses, David, Mary and Joseph. Really, we're all part of a bigger story.

Bryan: Yes and no question about it. We're all made on purpose, for a purpose, and God is at work, and there's always more going on than what we realize.

Cara: Prayer actually then allows me to be part of something bigger than myself.

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. It's certainly mysterious how it works. So, if you have a pencil handy, I'm going to give you a really good word. We refer to it as the "coterminous" actions of God and man, both going on parallel at the same time, and how they both work out, only God understands.

Cara: This also means that no prayer is too small then either.

Bryan: Yeah. So, think about it from a parenting standpoint. Do you ever limit what your kids should say to you? It's like, no, God wants to do life with me, big and small.

Arnie: Now that I think about it, I can see times when so often I have prayed, and the outcome has really made a tremendous impact on people's lives, both in the U.S. and Back to the Bible overseas. And it all starts with prayer. Sometimes though, I have a propensity to remember the prayers that I didn't think God answered, and then to find out three years later, God showed up. I was just too stupid to get it. But prayer is so critical in all that we do in all of our spiritual lives.

Cara: I'll say "Amen" to that.

Arnie: We prayed for Cara here, and look what happened!